

IS IT TIME TO BREAK UP BURMA?

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Introduction

For some time I have been thinking of writing an article titled “*Postmortem for a Freedom Movement.*” The premise was to be that the glorious and noble pro-democracy movement in Burma since 1988, really - the late 1950s, had irrevocably failed. We needed to accept this fact, move on, and try to begin organizing a new movement, one that would learn from the mistakes of its predecessor, attract new people, and lead the country - at long last - to liberty.

The movement of the last sixty years failed for many different reasons, foremost the decisive actions of the dictators, beginning with Ne Win. Another crucial factor was the lack of unity between and within the two major arms of the movement, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, together with student organizations, notably ABFSU, and which were largely Burman; and the many different ethnic armed organizations (and the Burman ABSDF). Suu Kyi not only never worked to establish a relationship with the EAOs, either overt or clandestine, it is apparent that she never even had the desire. The different EAOs also, for a variety of reasons, both historical and through the actions of the dictatorship, struggled to create a united front.

The point about the behavior of Suu Kyi is of course a separate reason for the failure unto itself. The dictatorship wore her down and finally persuaded her to accept a negotiated surrender. She would be allowed to compete in a fair election and lead a “democratic” Parliament, but which would have no real power. The military’s rule would be legitimized legally through its 2008 Constitution and practically through its control of the most important government ministries and also its soldiers and police. Burman citizens in the country’s Irrawaddy River lowlands would enjoy some increased independence, but the dictatorship retained the right to confiscate villager land at any time, and there would be limited freedoms of speech, association and the press. The hilly border areas, which comprise the bulk of the territory and also close to half of the population, but largely the non-Burman ethnic groups, would continue to be subjected to open dictatorial rule including active military repression.

In effect, the country would return to the distinction from its British colonial days, that of Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas. This time, though, the former would enjoy a little more freedom and the latter greater subjugation, the opposite of the rule of the British.

(I should note, though, that in another way there is no comparison between the two. The Burmans have always been 100 times more cruel than the British. For example, unlike the Burmans, British soldiers never perpetrated gang rapes as part of campaigns of genocide.)

What is surprising about all of this is not that Suu Kyi went along with it - her ethnic nationality antipathies were already present, for anyone who cared to look. No, it was that the students, starting with 88 Generation, caved and adopted the adjusted status quo so quickly. It seems they were also worn down, and decided to accept that this was the best that could be achieved. Of course, the big difference was that Suu Kyi had been detained under house arrest at her luxury lakeside villa. They had been imprisoned and tortured - the infamous pain positions and dog cells. I'm not criticizing the end of their resistance at all, just noting its existence.

This, therefore, comprised the failure of the pro-democracy movement, and with many of the former protestors now apparently pacified including in Suu Kyi's straw Parliament. The question was, how could we build something new from this state of affairs.

This question, though, is now moot. What happened in the run up to the Rohingya genocide - the adoption by the dictatorship of a new tactic to use racist Buddhist monks, and Suu Kyi, to inflame an intolerant nationalist frenzy, and the resulting genocide itself (dating from 2012), has been so momentous that Burma has entered a new historical age. The immediate past, from the departure of the British and the assassination of Aung San through to 2011 (when Suu Kyi surrendered), is gone. Burma has become a new country. And, the situation for it is now so acute that we are forced to ask the question, should it even survive?

A failed State

Perhaps I just overstated, about Burma being a country. Is this really the case? It certainly commands the territory of a proper nation, but until the departure of the British it was never unified in any sense other than through coercion - the actions of conquerors. Indeed, Burma's entire history is a record of conquest, extending back from the arrival of the British in the 1820s to the various Burman empires in the lowlands, and which invaded the homelands of the ethnic nationalities in the hills and also Thailand (then Siam). Throughout all of this time, the people of the land mass never had any real unity, excluding that imposed by force.

Burma only became a country after the British left following World War II, when Aung San negotiated the Panglong Agreement with the Shan, Kachin and Chin, and through which the Union of Burma was effectively established (and which was then formalized in the 1948 Constitution). Notably, the majority of the ethnic groups did not sign the Agreement, but most trusted Aung San and accepted its outcome. He was then assassinated, U Nu took over, Ne Win gained power temporarily in 1958, and then violently and permanently took control in 1962. This short span, from 1947 to 1962, is the only historical period in the Southeast Asian territory that Burma has been anything near a functioning nation. Since 1962, extending all the way until today, it has been a military-led criminal conspiracy, benefitting only the top generals and their families and cronies, and through which everybody else in the territory has been abused and robbed. While it might not share identical characteristics with those of other non-functioning states such as Somalia, in its own way it comprises an essential definition of failure.

Practical aspects of the failure of “Burma”

It is a great challenge to describe the problems in Burma. There are so many - where should one begin?

The most important fact is that the country, all the political smoke and mirrors notwithstanding, is still 100% a military dictatorship. How much power supreme dictator Than Shwe exercises behind the scenes on a day-to-day basis may be in doubt, but his public replacement Min Aung Hlaing nonetheless follows his diktats and maintains ironclad rule.

There is absolutely no rule of law. Reflecting this, the people have suffered a never-ending litany of human rights horrors, and with the regime perpetrators, including soldiers, police and other agents, enjoying complete immunity. Recent abominations include the rape and murder by Burma Army soldiers of the Kachin teachers, Maran Lu Ra and Tangbau Hkwan Nan Tsin, and the unquestionably regime-orchestrated assassination of lawyer U Ko Ni. Indeed, the distinct crimes of the dictatorship, using only one line to identify each crime, would fill a book thousands of pages long.

The atrocities extend up to many different cases of mass repression, including the Rohingya crisis, prior regime “Four Cuts” campaigns against other ethnic nationalities, and the Civil War. These actions have been nothing less than genocide and other systematic and widespread crimes against humanity. The savagery of the dictatorship in Burma continues to be among the most extreme anywhere in the world.

To this we can add innumerable other abuses, including the arrest, imprisonment and torture of political prisoners; land thefts and labor and environmental exploitation; and the restriction of civil liberties - an increasing criminalization of dissent and free media.

Treatment of the ethnic nationalities

Everyone in the Burma general public has suffered, but it is well-documented that the generals have reserved their worst behavior for the non-Burman ethnic nationalities. This in turn reflects their racism, and which comprises their fourth but unspoken “national cause.” Non-Burmans are deemed inferior and subordinate. They must accept Burmanization, meaning the destruction of their identities, or die.

The leaders of the dictatorship are genocidal criminals. They hate all non-Burmans, and want all the other Burmans to hate them as well. Their ideology is based on this racist, ultranationalist platform.

Repression of the ethnic nationalities, in addition to the violent crimes from individual to mass, involves many other actions. Here, specifically, we see the consequences of the “leadership” of

Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. In effect, the ethnic nationalities are being abused both by the military rulers and the supposed savior of the country.

Of critical note, the NLD is in no way democratic. Suu Kyi acts as its unquestioned autocrat. She controls everything, including making all important decisions. When she travels, the government goes on hold. She has purged the organization of any natural successors, and restricted the development of younger members. Her only real internal opposition ended when legendary activist and writer U Win Tin passed away.

Most people, including from the ethnic nationalities, voted under the NLD banner in the 2015 General Election. Following the win, and snubbing their support, Suu Kyi appointed Burman Administrators to many of the government positions in the ethnic states and divisions. She has proposed a law that would give the national parliament more power over the state assemblies. This is the essence of a unitary state, and the NLD has refused to even publish a position paper on federalism for Burma, which democratic structure is the only way ethnic interests can ever be guaranteed. More generally, she cut contact with ethnic communities following the election, and will not listen to them at all.

She has never, ever talked about, much less opposed, the countless crimes and abuses perpetrated by the military regime. The ethnic peoples have received from her nothing more than year after year of deadly silence.

There have been many other slights as well. She refuses to conclusively terminate the Chinese Myitson Dam project in Kachin State. She backs the China owned Letpadaung copper mine in Sagaing Division. She forced the Mon people against their wishes to accept her father's name for a large bridge. She will not allow the Karen to erect a statue of their founding leader, Saw Ba U Gyi. And, she has raised barriers to ethnic children being educated in their own languages.

Finally, she refuses to order her Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population to publish the ethnic group breakdowns from the national census, which was conducted going on four years ago. She won't even tell the ethnic peoples how many of them there are.

Instead, her Ministry issued a series of "explanations," for why they couldn't release the results. The first was that this would be a threat to national peace. Then the Ministry said that they would consult with "ethnic leaders" about the results. They said this many times, but there is no evidence at all that they did. Indeed, the first explanation is accurate. The ethnic nationality peoples have doubted for ages that taken together they are in the minority. Most people believe that pure Burmans are now only 30% or so. Announcing this would change everything, from the social conditions in the country to the so-called peace negotiations. Also, and as others have observed, the results would destroy the fiction of the dictatorship's "135 national races," which has been used as a tool of racism against the non-Burmans and now as justification for the Rohingya genocide.

Suu Kyi will never release the results. She has traded her presumed democracy credentials to be the leading spokesperson for the dictatorship's ideal that the country should in perpetuity be a unitary Burman-controlled state. She now fully advocates Burman ultranationalism.

The “Peace Process”

Suu Kyi is also the leader of the national peace process. Given what we have just seen, though, it necessarily will fail. A successful negotiation of this complexity requires that the different parties be willing to compromise, and an independent, objective intermediary. The Tatmadaw won't compromise, and Suu Kyi is biased. Two out of the three conditions are missing. The peace negotiations therefore cannot achieve nationwide peace. In fact, it is clear that both the military and even Suu Kyi don't want them to.

The adversaries in Burma are the military dictatorship - the Tatmadaw, and the ethnic pro-democracy resistance groups. There are now three alliances for the latter. (This is a result of dictatorship's successful use of divide and conquer). The first alliance comprises the signatories of the “Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement,” or NCA.

While there are eight actual signatories, only two count, the KNU/KNLA and the RCSS/SSA-S. They are the only signers which are not also long-standing dictatorship allies, and with substantial forces. The KNU signed after a series of events whereby the current corrupt leadership seized power. This occurred through vote fraud at the Congress in 2012 and then the manipulation of junior voting delegates at the last Congress earlier this year. The current leadership has sacrificed the Karen Revolution in exchange for personal power and money. For this betrayal, Karen areas have been infiltrated with new and reinforced Burma Army camps. Formerly the KNLA would have fought such incursions. Now, the leaders have let the enemy in.

The situation with the SSA-S appears to be more complex. The group has always shunned alliances with other EAOs. Why it also signed the NCA is a mystery, although pressure from Thailand and financial inducements from Europe are suspected.

Also of note, some of the signers of the NCA have been forbidden to hold public consultations, specifically in Shan and Arakan States, even though these are authorized by the agreement.

The NCA itself is a Surrender Agreement, akin to what the Japanese signed in 1945. There is no provision for an actual on the ground ceasefire. It is a literal ceasefire without a ceasefire! Instead, it is an insanely complicated document, and procedure, covering dozens of issues. This Gordian Knot complexity is purposeful, to ensure that the agreement can never be implemented. The only possible solution is to cut the knot, meaning to continue the resistance, defeat the Burma Army, and achieve freedom and peace.

The second alliance is the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), now reduced to four groups. They are under intense pressure to sign the NCA, through provocations from the Burma

Army and financial temptations as well. Most of the leaders, and certainly the ethnic peoples, are resisting the pressure. The UNFC negotiators have proposed nine points which, if the dictatorship agrees to them, they will then sign. There has been no movement on the most important of these points, and instead the negotiation has degraded to a series of informal talks about semantics.

The final association is the Northern Alliance Burma (NAB), with seven large and well-armed members. This is the remainder of the active resistance, and as punishment for their firm refusal to sign the NCA the dictatorship has launched many offensives against them. There has been persistent major conflict since 2011, with only brief lapses. This month the regime started new offensives in Kachin State and Northern Shan State. The Civil War is still raging.

The Burma Army, in effect, is continuing its ages-old attempted conquest of the ethnic nationality homelands.

The war in Burma has a curious characteristic. The dictatorship's main ally, in many different ways, is China. But China backs the NAB. China does not want Burma Army soldiers at its border, and is using the alliance as a classic "buffer force," similar to the relationship that used to exist between the KNU and Thailand. In any case, the NAB is determined. Its member groups will never give up.

This then is the conflict situation which Suu Kyi's joke peace process is supposed to resolve. The process is simply a regime time-delaying tactic, and which she must have figured out by now. The dictatorship's goals include to continue its conquest, but use the negotiations to reduce international pressure. The generals are getting richer and they are buying more and better weapons, and from many different national arms suppliers. (This month they commissioned ten new military aircraft, mainly sourced from Russia.)

They are in this for the long run. They want to delay peace - like all dictatorships they thrive on war, and use the reduced pressure to increase their power. This is the core military element of the overall strategy to establish a new Burman empire.

All of the meetings that have been held over the last three years are a technique of pacification. The solution to nationwide peace is in fact astonishingly simple: The Burma Army should stop attacking, and then pull back its troops. The generals will never do this.

End of Suu Kyi issue

There is no reason to believe that the military regime will change its strategy in any way. After all, it has been working. The Civil War therefore could easily continue for another half a century. One change that is coming, though, is the departure of Suu Kyi from the political scene. Her time is almost up. Min Aung Hlaing is likely to run for President in the next General Election in 2020, and he may well win. The racist mania was orchestrated to reduce pressure on the Tatmadaw - to

shift it to the Rohingya and Muslims more generally. The propaganda will certainly continue and at some point it will be focused on other non-Burman groups, foremost those that are Christian. Min Aung Hlaing's goal is to get this new generation of Burman fanatics to view him, not Suu Kyi, as the national savior. She will have played her part in the tragedy of Burma perfectly.

The question is if she will be disposed, or die from natural causes, or simply fade into irrelevance. For example, her apologists have said that she should not be pressured, including by demanding that she oppose the Rohingya genocide, because this could trigger a coup and the Tatmadaw reasserting overt control. This argument is ludicrous. The generals like things exactly as they are, with her as the fall guy. They will not remove her from the scene. No, the real strategy, as mentioned, is to win the 2020 election, after which she will become insignificant. Even the carpetbagging diplomats and businesspeople from the U.S. and Europe will stop visiting her door, especially now that she is losing her awards.

The ethnic resistance organizations and peoples need to anticipate this environment. Suu Kyi will be gone; the dictatorship's leading Burmans will have taken "legitimate" political power to match their military power; and the country will still be run on hate, of them.

In these circumstances, what reason can there be to submit and play the Burman game - to doom current and future ethnic nationality generations to servitude and being second-class citizens?

Culpability of the International Community

The final piece of the puzzle is the international community, its relationship to Burma in general and directly to the ethnic nationalities. Overall, both have been dreadful. For the second, consider the United Nations: Its Resident Coordinator this year blocked an advisory report that anticipated the attacks against the Rohingya, It also suppressed a report on Rohingya child starvation.

What type of people would do this, deliberately cover up information that could have been used to prevent the genocide, and the suffering and death of the most vulnerable?

The U.N., though, is just following standard international policy. The core provision here is sovereignty. No one has a right to criticize any other nation, for any reason at all, because that would mean it would be OK for people to criticize us. This is how morally corrupt the world is when it is organized as a system of nation/states and with absolute sovereignty over their own affairs. This has given us war, genocide, terrorism, human trafficking, environmental apocalypse, and global warming.

It's worth noting that the dictatorship's third national cause is "Perpetuation of Sovereignty."

For Burma specifically, a couple of other policies are in place. The first of these is that Aung San Suu Kyi is God, and that the rest of the world should back whatever she says, even if it is, in so many words, to ignore the Rohingya genocide. This replaces the former policy that Ne Win and

then Than Shwe were God (and the future policy that Min Aung Hlaing is God).

(Note: as an earlier example of such a practice, it was recently revealed that the U.S. knew about, and supported, the genocide in Indonesia from 1963-1966, by its Jakarta allies.)

Secondly, it is not only acceptable and desirable, it is an explicit goal, to promote trade with the country no matter the crimes against humanity that the dictatorship perpetrates. Dollars and euros always take precedence over blood. This begins with supplying weapons, including to help with the genocide, and even - amazingly - by Israel.

The leading arms and materiel suppliers to Burma are China, Russia, North Korea, Ukraine, Belarus, Israel, India, Serbia, and, before the European arms embargo, which activists finally succeeded in demanding, Bulgaria, Germany, Poland and Denmark. Some European diplomats want to end the embargo, and the U.S. is raring to go as well.

Thirdly, Burma is a protectorate of China, if not an actual colony. China effectively owns the country, no less than it does Laos and Cambodia. The rest of the world defers to this - it just wants a piece of the money pie.

Finally, the West - the U.S. and Europe, has always overlooked the Burman subjugation of the ethnic nationalities. No one has ever provided real assistance to the ethnic armies that are fighting for freedom and democracy. Similarly, the entire institutional NGO network is complicit in the repression. While the groups helping the refugees in Bangladesh (and elsewhere) certainly are fulfilling a useful mission, NGOs have never seriously opposed the dictatorship, in recognition that genuine freedom would end their jobs. It's a lot like the advertisements on American television calling for donations to help starving children or abused pets, and with a series of pathetic faces to tug the purse strings. Just treat the symptom, not the underlying problem. That way the symptoms will never disappear, and you can always keep asking for more money (especially at the holiday season!).

The money that major donors have plugged into "bandaid" programs for Burma (capacity-building, "peace"), including from NED, IRI, NDI, OSI, etc., are really just bribes for future business access. These groups not only don't care if the dictatorship is defeated, they have no desire to even see it go. Very specifically, they could give a damn about the ethnic nationalities, and have no concern at all about what happens to them.

All of this is reflected in the fact that the Western countries have refused to call the Rohingya crisis a genocide, or to insist upon Security Council action, a global arms embargo, and other types of sanctions. The U.S., as a sick joke, sanctioned one Tatmadaw officer - one!, as its response to the genocide.

Conclusion

Burma is a failed nation, all the rulers of which, including Aung San Suu Kyi, are Burman ultranationalists. They are exactly in the Nazi mold. They despise all the other ethnic groups and are dedicated to eliminating their identities, exploiting both them and their homelands, and even exterminating them when it serves their purposes. There is no prospect at all that this will change, and through a sophisticated propaganda campaign, now extended to social media, they are encouraging all other Burmans to join their program of hate. The international community refuses to oppose this. If anything, it has openly joined the Burman conspiracy.

While to some the current environment in Rangoon and Mandalay may seem just fine, the country overall is ruined. It will never escape the stain the genocide. The ethnic nationalities have no reason to believe that fundamentally it will ever change for the better - for them. They are being played; suckered; conned. They should take some time to really think about this, and then determine what to do.

Prior separatist movements

The obvious solution is a breakup of Burma, but it is not my place to advocate this. It is up to the ethnic nationalities to decide. Of note, though, there have been periodic calls since World War II for just such action.

The Naga people have demanded since 1947 their freedom from both Burma and India.

Chapter X of the 1948 Constitution provided the right of secession ten years after it came into effect. Instability at the time led U Nu in 1958 to “invite” Ne Win to take over. (The former was under duress, though, this was effectively a soft coup.) Then, following new elections in 1960, the Shan Federal Movement called for a “loose federation.” Ne Win viewed this as separatism, and attacked in the 1962 coup.

Since then there have been periodic calls for a break-up. Karen leader General Bo Mya and his colleagues at times pushed for a free and independent Karen State, or Kawthoolei. A decade and a half ago, there was an attempt to form an independent Interim Shan Government.

Of note, many of the EAOs have “Independence” or “Liberation” in their names.

In summary, there has been widespread revulsion over the rule of the Burmans. This has reached the point where many people, both ethnic nationality citizens and leaders, have concluded that they cannot coexist together. The only solution, therefore, is to separate.

Laying the groundwork to break up Burma

Disbanding Burma will be difficult, but not impossible. The most recent example of a similar situation was the breakup of Yugoslavia. The country was established following World War I, and then invaded by Germany at the beginning of World War II. After this it was briefly under Soviet influence, until dictator Tito gained control. Tito died in 1980, tensions between different ethnic groups developed, and Serb dictator Milosevic rose to power. With the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the other groups started to declare independence.

The Yugoslav Wars began in 1990, and the U.N. authorized peacekeeping operations at the end of 1991. The wars, excluding Kosovo, ended in 1995, during which period the U.N. peacekeepers ignored the Bosnian genocide. Later, the student OTPOR movement in Serbia aligned with the country's coal miners and launched a revolution which freed that country. Contemporaneous with this, the Kosovars fought their own war, with NATO assistance, to free themselves from Serbia. Through all of this, the Yugoslav Federation was replaced by the seven free and peaceful democratic states of Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo.

Serb and other war criminals were later brought to justice.

The Yugoslav breakup required great sacrifice. This is something with which the ethnic nationalities of Burma have decades of experience - suffering and sacrifice. They also have their own established armies.

I believe there should be a reinvigorated conversation among all the ethnic peoples over the question: Should we continue to accept Burman rule? Why shouldn't we be free? This article is an effort to help initiate the conversation.

From teashops to formal meetings (and of course on social media), there should be open discussions about declaring independence, including at forums organized by civil society groups, politicians, and the resistance armies. Everyone, the civilians and the soldiers, should talk about it. Would it be better to be free? Are we prepared to fight for our freedom once and for all? How do we get the necessary solidarity for such a struggle, both within our own group and with the other ethnic nationalities? How can we all oppose the Burma Army together? What preparation do we need to do? Finally, if we decide to pursue real independence, freedom and democracy, when and how should we begin?

A good place to start, and to which everyone can contribute, is to resist the creeping Burmanization, the arrival of new Burman businesspeople and settlers into the ethnic nationality homelands.